

George Washington's Town House  
Alexandria, Virginia

HABS No. VA-597 HABS

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A DOCUMENTARY STUDY OF  
GEORGE WASHINGTON'S TOWN HOUSE  
ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE  
Washington Office, Division of Design and Construction  
Washington 25, D. C.

A DOCUMENTARY STUDY OF  
GEORGE WASHINGTON'S TOWN HOUSE  
ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA

Street Address: 508 Cameron Street

Present Owner: Governor and Mrs. Richard Barrett Lowe. Mr. Lowe  
formerly served as Governor of American Samoa and Guam.

Present Use: The attached documentary study inspired the owners  
in 1960 to approximate under present-day conditions the outward  
appearance of historic house which stood on this site until 1855.

Brief Statement

of Significance: Over-all importance of accompanying source material  
is the involvement of George Washington in the role of architect,  
builder, and landlord.

A major breakthrough occurs in the matter of recalling  
several local workmen by name and establishing the technique of using  
steps hewn from solid blocks of wood.

Historical and Architectural Information: George Washington purchased  
lot 118 in 1763 and completed his house in 1769. References to this  
property have been found in his Diaries, Ledgers, Letters and Papers.  
Both the General and Martha mentioned the house in their wills. Other  
information of a secondary nature throws additional light upon this  
building. Three different drawings of the house, made from memory  
in the latter part of the nineteenth century are known. All are  
similar, revealing a high foundation (like the Ramsay House and other  
early Alexandria houses), indicative of later regrading of the Street.

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One commentator observed "When first built, it stood on the brow of a hill...When the street was graded after the Revolution the house was not disturbed; upon the earthen being cut away it remained intact...and the door reached by a high porch." Accompanying data throws interesting light on the customary methods of fencing property and protecting town garden areas.

Washington's Town House, a simple story-and-a-half regional dwelling with stable and other necessary buildings, was often lent or rented to members of the family and friends. Dr. William Brown lived in it for a while; later Cleon Moore, a music teacher and composer lived there. In 1794 while preparing the house for the occupancy of Mrs. Fanny Washington, widow of his nephew and niece of Martha Washington, the General gave instructions to have it painted stone color with a red roof. He mentioned a well in the cellar, and it is interesting to note that a trace of filled-in dry well was discovered in excavating for the new house.

Washington's town house had been placed in excellent repair for Fanny Washington and her family. When she married the General's secretary, Tobias Lear, in 1795 and moved elsewhere, Washington sought to realize more rent for the house than the property had previously produced. Writing to Lear in 1798 he indicated that he thought his house and lot worth £1200. He complained that £60 rent per year would be only 5 per cent of the value, and that the rent was inadequate. In 1799 Washington willed the property to his wife, Martha, and she in turn willed it to her nephew,

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Bartholomew Dandridge. Shortly after receiving his inheritance, Dandridge died, and the house passed to other hands. In 1855 it belonged to a man named Waters "who possessed little or no sentiment" and the place had badly deteriorated. Apparently Waters, in financial distress, was unable to restore the house or to get anyone else to finance it, so he tore it down for its salvage value.

Waters made a clean sweep of his salvage operations, so that no evidence was forthcoming on the dimensions of the building. Regrading of the site had apparently contributed to the almost complete obliteration of structural remains. A small number of old bricks and stones were recovered and these have been utilized to face the mantel and hearth of the basement fireplace. Stones dug out of the yard have been used as lintels for foundation windows, however no positive claim is made that these fragments are from the original house.

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SOURCE MATERIAL ON  
GEORGE WASHINGTON'S TOWN HOUSE  
Based on Manuscript and Printed Sources

Diary, September 28, 1769:

... I rid to Alexandria to see how my House went on...

Diary, October 4, 1769:

Rid to Alexandria to see how my Carpenters went on with my Ho.

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Ledger A, January 17, 1770:

By Richd. Lake--Balle. Acct. for Work done on my  
House in Alexandria £ 22.5.2 (Ledger A)

Diary, March 18, 1771:

Rid to Posey's to lay a fence before Breakfast and went  
to Court afterwards and stayd all Night.\*

(\*Washington's expense account does not show where he lodged  
in Alexandria; his house was finished and absence of a lodging  
expense indicates that he occupied his own dwelling.)

Diary, August 20, 1771:

Went up to Court again and lodged in my own House.

Diary, November 19, 1771:

Dined at Arrell's and lodged at my own House...

Diary, July 16, 1772:

Went up in the afternoon with Mrs. Washington, J. P.  
Custis, Miss Custis, and Milly Posey to a Ball in Alexandria.  
Lodged at my House in Town.

Diary, September 21, 1772:

Went up to Court in Alexa. and Dined at Arrell's and  
Supped at Arrell's. Lodged at my own House.

Ledger A - folio 179, May 1784

By Mr. Will Bushby for repairg. the Windows of the  
House in Alex. to Paintg. the Lamp 0/19/9

Papers of G.W. Vol. 235 (Jan. 17 - May 31, 1786)

"February 20th 1786 - I have this Day agreed to pay for the use  
of Gen. Washingtons House and Lott in the Town of Alexandria (lately  
occupied by Doctr. Wm Brown) for the Term of one Year from this Date  
Forty Pound (one word undecipherable) to Fence in the Lott with a  
good and sufficient Fence either of Post and Rail or Plank to cleanse  
and repair the drain leading from the Cellar and Glaze the Windows  
of the said house.

William Hailey

I promise to see the above engagement fulfilled.

Alexandr. Smith"

Writings, G.W. to Cleon Moore, Philadelphia,  
July 19, 1793.

Sir: I duly received your letter of the 5 inst: but at a time when I was much engaged that it was not in my power to write you an answer. And now, having no knowledge of the condition in which my house and Lot in Alexandria are, and being equally ignorant of the rent of such houses in that Town. I have requested the favor of my acquaintance and friend Colo. Fitzgerald to negotiate this business with you. Any agreement then, which you can make with him will be obligatory on, Sir, etc.

Writings, G.W. to John Fitzgerald, Philadelphia  
July 19, 1793

Dear Sir: The day preceeding my departure from Mount Vernon, the enclosed letter was put into my hands. pressed as I was at the time by other business, I could give it no answer; and the next day when I saw you in Alexandria this matter had escaped me. I give you the trouble, therefore (since you have allowed me the liberty) to fix something with Mr. Moore on the subject of it. Whatever that may be will be satisfactory, and shall be binding on me, with two provisos, 1st. that the term for which the lease is given, shall not exceed five years, and 2dly that whatever repairs Mr. Moore may want, and are really necessary, shall be specifically enumerated, and executed under his own auspices and at his own expence, making a reasonable allowance therefor in fixing the rent. By such enumeration, it may at any time be seen whether the work stipulated has been executed; for in default thereof there can be no claim of deduction.

I have two motives for giving you this trouble, one because I know you are a good judge of what the House and Lot ought to rent for, and the other, because I have no person in my employ at present in whom I can confide to negotiate this business for me. I am etc:

Papers of G.W. Vol. 261 (June 12 - Aug. 5, 1793):  
Abstract

John Fitzgerald.

Alexandria. Aug. 3, 1793

Ack G.W. of July 19 re. house in Alex. He visited the house and found it occupied by a woman named Jackson with a family of children. Her husband was in Boston and would be back in about 3 weeks. They had rented it from Whiting at £ 10 per annum, and the rent was to be laid out in repairs. Stable and fence are in ruinous condition. Will see Jackson when he returns.

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Writings, G.W. to John Fitzgerald, Philadelphia,  
August 11, 1793.

If there be any specific agreement, in writing, between Mr. Whiting and the occupant of my Lot in Alexandria, I must abide by it, however erroneous the measure; provided it shall appear that the tenant has, or is in a way and condition to comply with his part of the contract. If no such written agreement can be exhibited, I shall not think myself under obligation to suffer the present family to remain longer in possession; for I well remember the conversation you allude to, in your presence; and I recollect also, to have been told by my deceased Nephew, Majr. Washington, that this, or some other occupant of the house, a little before, or after that conversation, had engaged to inclose the Garden with a good Post and Rail or Plank fence, and to repair the Houses completely. If these are not done the most he can expect, is to be permitted to go off quietly.

Under this explanation of my ideas, respecting the business, I shall leave it to you, my dear Sir, to act for me as you would for yourself, and I shall feel myself very much obliged by it.

Writings, G.W. to William Pearce, Philadelphia,  
December 22, 1793.

The work essentially necessary to be done by my Carpenters, and wanting the most, is, compleating the New Barn at Dogue Run and the Sheds there for horses &ca. Erecting the house for Crow. Repairing my house in Alexandria for Mrs. Fanny Washington, which must be done before the month of May, and inclosing the lot on wch. it stands for a Garden or Yard.

Writings, G.W. to William Pearce, Philadelphia,  
February 9, 1794.

You will remember in time that my house in Alexandria is got in order for Mrs. Fanny Washington; as I have promised to do this by the time mentioned to you in former letters.

Papers of G.W. Vol. 265 (Jan. 21 - March 15, 1794):  
Abstract

Wm. Pearce.

Mt. V. Feb. 11, 1794

Ack G.W. of Feb. 3. Farm matters. Trouble with Green. The Alexandria house & stable need a good deal of repairing. The fence is quite gone. Suggests hiring carpenters in town.

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G.W. to William Pearce, Philadelphia  
February 16, 1794.

My intention, with respect to the repairs of my house in Alexandria, and inclosing the lot, was, that every particle of the work, except putting it together, should be prepared at Mount Vernon, and carried thither by Water; for sure, I am, if the whole was to be executed in Town that four faithful workmen would do more there in one week than any four of mine would do in a month. I expected that Green, or some one that was a judge of work, would examine critically what was to be done, that the whole might be carried on in the manner I have just mentioned. This, as far as the dwelling house is concerned, has been done already; but not I believe with the accuracy that is necessary to prevent mistakes. In truth, the Man who lives in it, ought, by his agreement, to have kept the houses &c in perfect repair; for that is the only compensation he proposed (I believe) to make me for the use of it; and when I saw him last, in October, he told me that he had made a new door, or doors, and some sashes, and was going on with the work. It might be well therefore, the first time you go to town, to examine minutely into the matter, see what he has done, what he talks of doing, on what terms, and how far he may be depended upon for what he engages; remembering always that the house must be in order by the time you have been informed of. Whether this man (that is the tenant) is a joiner or house Carpenter himself, or not, I am unable to say: If the former, and he is to be Depended upon, all you can get out of him, in time, by way of compensation for Rent, will be so much saved to me; but nothing that is essential to the two houses, must be left to uncertainties. Inclosing the lot in time is not quite so material; but let it be done in a very substantial manner whenever it is set about; with such Posts and Rails (close enough together) as will completely secure a garden, whenever it is converted to that use, and not easily pulled down for firing. You might, in order to know what the work can be accomplished for, by hiring, get a respectable workman of Alexandria to determine the two houses carefully, set down everything wanting to them, and the lowest he will do it for. I could, after receiving this, with your opinion thereupon, be better able to decide whether to hire or employ my own people. This may also be done with respect to enclosing the lot; though I conceive there would be more propriety in doing the latter than the former, with my own Carpenters. If large and stout Cedar Posts, and chestnut or Cyprus Rails could be bought reasonably it would be better than to get them of Oak, from my own land, and let the estimate of the workman, you may consult, be made on the supposition of their being so. In wch. case, it might be better to employ him; for otherwise they would, more than probably be to be brought from Alexandria to Mount Vernon and then to go back again, or my Carpenters must go there to dress, Mortise, and tenant them; which, as I have observed before, I am sure would afford them the opportunity of being idle.



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Writings, G.W. to William Pearce, Philadelphia,  
March 9, 1794.

I approve your repairing my house in Alexandria with my own People (preparing everything that can be, at home); and also of your doing it in the manner proposed; that is, to board between the houses in a neat and workman like manner and to enclose the other three sides of the lot with White Oak Posts and Rails well executed. Do not let the Posts be too far distant from each other; when this is the case the rails are apt to warp and the fence is weakened by it.

Writings, G.W. to William Pearce, Philadelphia,  
April 6, 1794.

When you go next to Alexandria take the exact dimensions of the rooms in my house at that place, that I may send paper for them. Give the length and breadth of each, and height from the wash board to the Chair board (as they are commonly called) and thence to the Cornish, if any, with the doors and windows, and size of them, in each room or passage. If there is occasion to make good the plastering in any of the rooms, no white wash is to be put thereon; because it is improper for paper. Thomas Davis must paint the outsides of both houses there; the lower part of a stone colour, and the roofs red. The Inside of the dwelling house is also to be painted. The whole in short is to be put in very good and decent condition. If the planking between the two houses is plained, this also should be painted.

Writings, G.W. to William Pearce, Philadelphia,  
April 27, 1794.

Thomas Green's account of the dimensions of the Rooms in my house in Alexandria is so confused and perplexed, that I can make neither head nor tail of it. The length, breadth and height of each, with the distance from the washboard to the Chair board, and the number of doors and windows in each room, was all I wanted; instead of these he has attempted to draw a plan which no one can understand, and has given an explanation of it that is still more incomprehensible.

Writings, G.W. to William Pearce, Philadelphia,  
May 4, 1794.

It is not usual, nor is there any occasion, for Papering the ceiling of the Room, or rooms (if more than one should be papered) in the House, in Alexandria. I am &c.

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Writings, G.W. to William Pearce, Philadelphia,  
May 11, 1794.

By the first Vessel bound to Alexandria from hence, I will send Paper for the two lower Rooms in my house in that place; but if it has been newly plastered, as would appear to be the case (in part at least) by Green's acct. it ought not to be put on until it is thoroughly dry; or the Paper will be lost.

Writings, G.W. to William Pearce, Philadelphia,  
May 18, 1794.

I presume the lot in Alexandria will have been inclosed by the Post and Rail fence, intended for it; and the house, inside and out, painted, before the workmen were withdrawn from thence. It ought to be left in charge of some person who will attend to it, until Mrs. F. Washington takes possession thereof.

Writings, G.W. to William Pearce, Philadelphia,  
May 25, 1794.

A vessel is now up for Alexandria, by which I shall send Paper for my House in that place.

Papers of G.W. Vol. 267 (May 8 - July 12, 1794)

Weekly work report. 3 p.

May 31, 1794

Mans. House

"By hauling Lime to Town 1 day & steps for the house that were made here out of a Solid Block of timber 2 days."

Papers of G.W. Vol. 267 (May 8 - July 12, 1794)

Separate Join. & Carp. report, 1 fol. page. May 31, 1794

"Making ye Mangers for ye house in town..."

"By James Ruburn to weatherboarding of ye Necessary and making a Rack & manger for ye stables and a Cellar door for the house in town. By Davis Mucklass to laying of bricks for ye foundation of the steps at ye frunt Door & ye well (w-ul, weel?) of the Necessary."

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Writings, G.W. to William Pearce, Philadelphia,  
June 8, 1794.

Mrs. Fanny Washington writes that the Cellar of my House in Alexandria wants paving, and to be drained, as it is very damp. Let the first be done at any rate, and the latter if it shall appear necessary, as I presume it is. You had better buy smooth, and well burnt bricks in Town than to carry them up. This job will afford another week for Davis and his attendants; when one man, in this City, would begin and finish it the materials being on the spot) in half a day...

Twelve Carpenters in this City, would have built every house which is on my lot in Alexandria (from the foundation) in less time than mine were employed in the few repairs they received; but from the habits of idleness which they have contracted, and the bad examples of Green, nothing better I am sure is to be expected from them while they are under his management. I am etc.

Papers of G.W. Bol. 267 (May 8-July 12, 1794)  
June 21, 1794...

"Scouring out the house in town, digging well in cellar, carrying water out of cellar, carrying sand in cellar & paving one of ye rooms, digging down bank at ye Road to go in to yard."

Writings, G.W. to William Pearce, Philadelphia,  
July 13, 1794.

It is my wish and desire that everything requisite for my house in Alexandria, may be done without delay; that Mrs. Fanny Washington may remove to it as soon as she pleases. Besides paving the Cellars, and laying a floor in one end of the Stable she proposed to have some place railed up, or done up in some other manner, higher than usual, to secure her Wood from being pilfered this you may cause to be done. The floors want to be smoothed over with a plane and the painting made good after which I know of nothing to hinder her going into it for it can be papered as well after as before she goes into it.

I observed the Hearth below in that House and it might be the same above, was of brick and badly laid. Get Mr. Oneill to prepare slabs in one of two pieces, according to the size of the stone, from the quarry he is working at Mount Vernon, to replace the brick and let them be bordered as usual by mitred pieces of Wood for the flooring Plank to butt against instead of running the ends of the plank up to the Brick or Stone as is the case there I perceive.

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G.W. to William Pearce, German Town  
August 3, 1794.

It seems to me, to be indispensibly necessary that some person should be engaged in place of Thomas Green, to look after my Carpenters; for in the manner they conduct under his Superintendence, it would be for my interest to set them free, rather than give them their victuals and cloaths. James, by the Reports, has been 9 days I perceive, in plaining the floors of the house in Town, Muclus (besides what was done to it before) Six days paving, and sanding the Cellar which a man in Philadelphia wd. have done in less than as many hours. Davis eight or nine days papering, and so on; whilst Green himself, and the others, appear determined (as it would seem to me) to make the new-house at Union farm a standing job for the Summer; as the Chimney, and underpinnings will, more than probably be, for Davis the same time. When this last work is done, that is, underpinning the house, it must be remembered that air holes is left in it to prevent the sleepers from rotting.

Papers of G.W. Vol. 268 (July 13-Sep. 8, 1794)

Weekly work report.  $3\frac{1}{2}$  p.

Aug. 30, 1794

Mans. House.

"By Cart hauling furnature to town for Mrs. Washington." 1 day.

Papers of G.W. Vol 276 (Oct. 20 - Dec. 25, 1795)

Tobias Lear.  $1\frac{1}{2}$  p.

Washington, Dec. 14, 1795

"I have the pleasure to inform you that your House in Alexandria is rented for Sixty pounds Virga<sup>a</sup> Curry<sup>y</sup> per Annum, to Mr. Nathl. Washington, who will go into it immediately. His rent, by written agreement, commences on the 17<sup>t</sup> of November, as that was the time he first spoke about it."

Writings, G.W. to Fitzgerald, Herbert, and Gilpin,  
Mount Vernon, November 22, 1797

Gentlemen: On Monday last, in Alexandria, Colo. Marstellar applied to me to rent my lot with the house on it in that place for three years, from the expiration of the year for wch it is now engaged(at Sixty pounds until Feby.).

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I answered, that I was well disposed to receive him as a tenant and for the term above mentioned, but was unable to fix the rent then; being unacquainted with such as were usual in Alexandria, or might be expected within that period, but that I would leave it to you three Gentlemen, or any two of you who should agree, to say what it should be. And moreover to enumerate what repairs it would be indispensibly necessary for me to make again, it not being long the houses and inclosure were put into complete Order.

Your compliance with the request will very much oblige me, and I shall hope to be excused for the trouble it will give you. Be assured of the esteem etc.

Writings, G.W. to Philip Marsteller, Mount Vernon,  
November 22, 1797.

Sir: The enclosed result, from our conversation on Monday last. It is left open for your perusal and presentation, and I shall consider the decision of the Gentlemen to whom it is addressed, as obligatory on me.

As no time ought to be lost in securing the stone work of the Stable, I now authorise you, to get it effectually done upon the best terms you can, without awaiting for their report, and without delay, to avoid accidents, and a greater expence. With esteem etc.

Papers of G.W. Vol. 286 (Oct. 22, 1797 - Jan. 24, 1798)

"Alexandria Januy 17th 1798

Sir

Agreeable to your desire we have Viewed the house and lot belonging to you which is now occupied by Col<sup>o</sup> Philip Marsteller. It appears that the following repairs may be necessary, to wit, the Stable to be under pinned with a good wall on the north side and the loft door mended, the gate & fence on Pitt Street and the Dividing fence on the South side to be rapaired, in the house there are three Harthes and some pieces of plaster to be repaired, and we are of Opinion that Sixty Six pounds pr annum will be a Reasonable rent for the house and lot We are with great esteem your very

Humble<sup>e</sup> Servt<sup>s</sup>

George Gilpin  
John Fitzgerald  
Wm. Herbert"

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Papers of G.W. Vol. 289 (June 19, July 23, 1798)

"Alexandria June 21st, 1798

Sir

Mr. Anderson called on me to know to whom & when I paid the rent of the House occupied by me last year.

As I rented the House of Mr. Lear under the impression that it was his - I paid him \_\_\_\_\_ 25th August  
Hundred Dollars for the first half years rent ending 1st of that month - & I had Mr. Lears note \_\_\_\_\_  
of Nine Hundred Dollars in \_\_\_\_\_ of which I \_\_\_\_\_  
being the last years rent.

I am etc. Joseph Riddle"

Writings, G.W. to Tobias Lear,  
Mount Vernon, June 25, 1789.

Dear Sir: You will perceive by the enclosed what manner I am disappointed in receiving the Rent for my house in Alexandria. These things put you, the payer and myself, in an awkward situation; for it must seem strange to demand what has been paid. I must therefore request, in explicit terms, that you will receive no more monies due to me; and I should be glad to have a statement of the A/c as it stands between us, since the last was rendered; it appearing by information from my Collector in Montgomery County, Maryland, that some part of my Rents there, has been paid to you since the period above mentioned.

Writings, G.W. to Tobias Lear,  
Philadelphia, November 2, 1798

If you have not already agreed for the Rent of my house in Alexandria at Sixty pounds pr Annum, I wish this sum might be compared with other rents, before it is fixed on. I was told by several as I passed through Alexandria, that I might readily dispose of the lot, if I was so inclined, for £ 1200: Sixty pounds rent wd. be only an interest of five pr Ct, which is inadequate for house Rent.

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Will of G.W., 1799

Item. To my dearly beloved wife Martha Washington I give an bequeath the use, profit and benefit of my whole Estate, real and personal, for the term of her natural life - except such parts thereof as are specifically dispersed of hereafter; - My improved lot in the Town of Alexandria, situated on Pitt & Cameron Streets, I give to her and her heirs forever...

Will of M.W., 1802

Item. I give and devise to my nephew Batholomew Dandridge & his heirs my lot in the town of Alexandria situated on Pitt and Cameron streets devised to me by my late husband George Washington deceased.

The Last Will and Testament of George Washington...  
edited by John C. Fitzpatrick, Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union, 1939, pp.1,56,63.

References: Alexandria Association, Our Town: 1749-1865, Richmond, 1956, p.92 (Note on Mary Jane Stewart's drawing, being sketched 1856).

Davis, Deering, Stephen P. Dorsey and Ralph Cole Hall, Alexandria Houses, 1750-1830, New York, 1946, pp.62, 66,68.

Moore, Gay Montagne, Seaport in Virginia: George Washington's Alexandria, Richmond, 1949, pp.21,120,210-11.

Powell, Mary G., The History of Old Alexandria, Virginia, Richmond, 1928 (passing reference on p.125, author's sketch, p.137).

Prepared by: Worth Bailey, Architectural Historian, HABs, February, 1961.

Approved by:

  
Chief Architect

Date 3-1-61